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WHAT THE INDUSTRY READS FIRST

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## DID YOU KNOW?

A new Pew Research Center survey found 37% of Americans think it's not too or not at all likely that the United States will elect a woman as president, up from 26% in 2023. What's unchanged is that 18% still say that it's either not important to them or that the gender of the president doesn't matter.



# RIGHTFIBER CLOSES DEAL, WANTS MORE

Sometimes, mergers don't need to take more than a year to cross the finish line. **Ritter Communications** and **Great Plains Communications** closed their combination Wednesday, taking just 78 days to finalize the connectivity industry's newest player, **Rightfiber**.

"We have the great opportunity here to bring these two 100-plus-year-old companies together that were born out of family, local telcos that made the shift over decades into being true fiber providers, but we continue to focus on communities, focus on each other and our customers," Rightfiber CEO *Heath Simpson* said in an interview with ***CFX***. "I love that while we brought together two slightly different companies, they share common values and common vision."

The combination of Ritter and GPC, founded in 1906 and 1910, respectively, creates an operator serving more than 400 communities in a 20-state footprint that stretches from Arkansas to Nebraska. Rightfiber holds over 300,000 FTTH passings via a 28,000-mile fiber network and now stands as one of the largest privately owned telecom and fiber broadband platforms in the U.S., with an employee base exceeding 800 total.

However, that's not preventing Rightfiber from eyeing even more growth as it settles into a new, unified chapter. It entered a $1.6 billion credit facility led by Fifth Third Bank that'll primarily be used "to go out and continue to grow"—and it sounds like there are a few prospects that have already caught the company's eye.

"We will continue to grow organically, and we'll continue to look at M&A," Simpson said. "Consolidation is the trend in our industry. We'll look at all things. We are continuing to build today—folks are putting fiber in the ground in various markets that we operate in, and we see some interesting opportunities out there as well from an inorganic standpoint."

Although the initial merger announcement was made in mid-June, Ritter and GPC belonged to the same **Grain Management** portfolio since 2019 and 2018, respectively. The common ownership allowed the transaction to avoid a change-of-control kind of review that typically prolongs M&A deals. Take **Charter** and **Cox**, where it took 15 months to complete their $34.5 billion merger. Or **Verizon** and **Frontier**, which wrapped up in January after 16.5 months.

Common ownership also let Rightfiber complete "far more pre-work, pre-merger close than is usual or typical," according to Simpson, who joined Ritter in 2020 as CFO, rising to President/COO in late 2022 and then CEO in early 2024. He'll oversee Rightfiber as *Todd Foje*, who had been GPC's CEO for nearly two decades, will serve as Executive Chairman. The executive team was formed and began building organizational structures months before close. That's made the ongoing customer and network integration processes smoother as well, with the company entering a common network operations center and already connecting the networks across Rightfiber's footprint.

Customer-facing changes will be rolled out in phases through signage, vehicles and technician uniforms, with bills following over the next few cycles. Service tiers, pricing and product bundles will remain unchanged for now, though that could change over time.

"Our focus is we're just going to keep giving them the same great customer experience they've been receiving. That's step one," Simpson said. "We don't want anyone to have an issue here because there's no reason to."

Longer term, Simpson noted that Rightfiber leadership came up with a multi-year plan (prior to closing, of course) that fit his priorities. "That we grow a bigger company that is able to employ more Americans, provide phenomenal fiber internet to more communities, grow our customer base and do the right thing for our customers, communities and employees," he said.

## MEDIACOM'S DANDNAIK RETIRES

SVP, Operations, Product Strategy & Consumer Experience *Tapan Dandnaik* is saying farewell to the industry after 21 years at **Mediacom**, announcing his retirement Wednesday to spend more time with his wife *Chitkala* and daughter *Sanjana*. "I am proud of what we have accomplished together and especially proud of the progress we have made in transforming our customer experience, expanding our products and services, and positioning Mediacom for the future," Dandnaik said in a statement. He will remain at Mediacom for the next several months to ensure a smooth transition, with his successor to be named at a later date. The cable exec joined the company in May 2005 and helped transform Mediacom's operations and expand its product portfolio, including launching Eero WiFi, multi-gig broadband services and growing its mobile business. Dandnaik also led the transformation of customer service operations and helped guide the company through the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only has Dandnaik been recognized in the ***CFX 100***, but he also received the Vanguard Award for Young Leadership in 2012 for his contributions to the cable industry. Bon voyage, Tapan!

## PRIME VIDEO ADDS SIX NHL TEAMS; DAZN SIGNS SPURS

Another streaming platform is making a push for local sports rights following the downfalls of **Victory+** and the **FanDuel Sports Network** RSNs. **Amazon**'s **Prime Video** entered a multiyear deal to be the exclusive local streaming service for six **NHL** teams: Anaheim Ducks, Columbus Blue Jackets, Dallas Stars, Minnesota Wild, St. Louis Blues and the defending Stanley Cup champs Carolina Hurricanes. Prime Video will host all regular-season games that aren't being aired on national TV throughout each franchise's respective territory. Plus, each team will get a pre- and postgame show and other original content centered around players, coaches and organizations. Specific details such as subscription options will be announced by each team. -- In tandem with the Prime Video push is **DAZN**'s recent wave of local deals, the latest being the **NBA**'s San Antonio Spurs. DAZN will be their local DTC provider throughout the regular season (minus nationally televised games). While subscription details will be unveiled in the coming weeks, the Spurs will broadcast 22 games OTA through a local partner. Those details are also to be announced.

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## SPARKLIGHT CARRIER SERVICES SIMPLIFIES ORDERING

Sparklight Carrier Services, **Cable One**'s wholesale connectivity solutions business providing service across a network spanning 24 states, implemented TransUnion Universal Order Connect (UOC) to streamline and simplify the ordering experience for its national and regional clients. UOC is designed to improve order accuracy and visibility while also helping accelerate service delivery and deployment. The operator said its new automated wholesale ordering process will cut back on the manual steps it takes to order and deploy services and make it easier to track orders.

## FIBER FRENZY

**Comcast**'s buildout in Jackson County, Michigan, reached the halfway mark, with over 7,400 addresses now connected to Xfinity and business services. Construction in Concord, Horton, Leslie, Onondaga and Rives are nearing completion and projects are now underway in Hanover, Jackson, Munith, Parma and Pleasant Lake. The full expansion will be completed next spring. The operator has connected an additional 32,000 Michigan homes and businesses in the past year.

## DOING GOOD

**WOW!** partnered with the Augusta GreenJackets, the Carolina League affiliate of the Atlanta Braves, on back-to-school initiatives as well as to recognize educators in the Central Savannah River Area. Through the partnership, WOW! hosted a "Stuff the Bus" school supply drive for local students, family activities and is running a Teacher of the Month program honoring an educator and gifting them game tickets and more.

**In The WILD**

*A CFX feature highlighting industry doings spotted in the real world.*

### Archtop Fiber Celebrates Sand Lake Launch

Archtop Fiber hosted a celebration, including a ribbon-cutting ceremony, on Aug. 13 to celebrate the launch of internet service in Sand Lake, New York, where more than 1,500 homes and businesses now have access to symmetrical speeds of up to 10 Gbps. The event marked the culmination of an accelerated buildout that began in June.

The ISP's senior leadership, along with Sand Lake Supervisor Stephen Clemens, Town Clerk Barbara Hansen and local residents, gathered at Butler Park in Averill Park to celebrate with a "Mario Kart" tournament on a giant LED screen and complimentary brick-oven pizza. "We are pleased to welcome Archtop Fiber to Sand Lake," Clemens said. "This investment will help position Sand Lake for continued growth and success."

Archtop Chairman/CEO Jeff DeMond applauded the "speed and dedication" with which its teams brought the community online. "The pace of this build has been remarkable—matched only by the top speeds our all-fiber network now delivers," he said.


The Sand Lake project marked the latest milestone in its continued investment in broadband infrastructure in New York. Archtop also recently launched service for local government and law enforcement facilities in Warwick and expanded its network to East Greenbush. The provider launched new 5 Gig and 8 Gig residential plans in April, supported by a WiFi 7 partnership with Eero. - *John Saavedra*

# THINK ABOUT THAT FOR A MINUTE...

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## AND SO IT BEGINS

In 2006, the major tobacco companies were found liable under a racketeering law for conspiring to deceive the public about the addictiveness and health risks of cigarettes. In the two decades since, smoking by American adults has been cut in half. Last week, we saw a similar process begin for social media.

Meta, owner of Facebook and Instagram, settled a major case accusing it of intentionally designing products to be addictive and that those products create major health risks. There's a reason it's called "doomscrolling." There's a reason school systems around the country are banning "screens" during school. There's a reason parents are trying, and in many cases failing, to control or at least limit the effects of almost nonstop use of social media and chatbots by their children. It all comes down to following the money.

The companies behind Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and the like figured out how to design their products to effectively be addictive. They did it because the longer someone stays online, the longer they are exposed to ads and influencers and the more successful the companies become. They are now some of the richest and most powerful companies in the world. And it all started with figuring out how to keep folks glued to their screens. And we all know that what those screens deliver, in too many cases, is toxic.

When the internet became popular, it was viewed as the next big thing. The policy folks, rightly, wanted to see it succeed. Thus, one of the most important regulatory decisions was to create Section 230, which protected edge companies from liability for the content that was placed on their platforms by users. The argument was simple: the companies were not the content creators. The major tech companies we have today, as a result, grew massive through search, social media and maybe now chatbots while being able to deny responsibility for the toxicity that inevitably followed.

The internet brought lots of great things, but it also brought a lot that was negative. We need not go into all that here. You know. But the companies kept going, seeking more and better ways to expose folks to that which was most outrageous, most far out, most exhibitionist and much of it was also simply not accurate. It didn't matter. The companies claim protection under Section 230.

Finally, however, attorneys general of states around the country (not the Feds!) figured out that the model of how the tobacco industry was tamed could work in this case too: instead of either trying to go after each "speaker," which is an impossibility, or get Section 230 changed, which, with this administration and Congress is simply not going to happen, they brought legal action from a different direction: the same direction that finally got the tobacco industry. They argued that the algorithms designed by the companies were intentionally addictive and dangerous. Especially for kids. And kids are clearly being harmed. The case that was settled last week when it became clear that Meta was likely to lose in court is the harbinger of a potentially major shift in the use of their product. Chatbots as well? Probably.

There are lots of details we don't know about yet. The dollar figure being bandied about (around $18 billion) is not terribly relevant. Meta won't pay it all. It will pay an initial $12.7 billion and an additional $5.3 billion hinges on YouTube (Google/Alphabet) and TikTok agreeing to make their own changes. It's not that big a hit for trillion-dollar companies.

The important part is the other stuff. Like agreeing to a two-hour use limit for kids per day, or even more important, the ability for kids or parents to turn off the algorithm that delivers the most popular, most watched stuff (read "most outrageous") and return to the the original way social media was designed: chronologically, with only the messages and information from folks they know or intentionally seek out rather than the carnival that is taking place on every teenager's phone today.

Is this going to fix the problems that we all can see with the way our screen interactions are working today? No, not likely. There will be a lot of bumps in the road, a lot of backsliding, a lot of loopholes and intentional workarounds, but it's a start. And an important one. And so it begins.